

Reflections on Growth

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Intensive Growth in Advanced Clusters

During the past year in a number of countries, greater attention was given to expansion in advanced clusters. The most systematic approach to date is emerging in Asia, where the Counsellors decided to place emphasis on large-scale expansion during their consultations and planning with certain National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils. In the first six months of the year, through a focus on teaching projects in strong clusters, approximately 16,000 new believers entered the Faith.

Efforts are now being made to learn how to balance expansion and consolidation so that growth can be sustained. The friends in some clusters have successfully established their training program and pyramid of human resources, helping a sizable number of believers to proceed through the entire sequence of courses, thereby creating a new dynamic in the activities in the cluster. The energies of these newly trained believers have also been applied to multiplying core activities, and to involving an increasing number of non-Bahá'ís into the pattern of Bahá'í community life. Finally, believers in these clusters have been able to take the additional step of initiating systematic teaching activities. Many have had success in this new endeavor, managing to bring more than 100 new believers into the Faith in the cluster while incorporating a percentage of them into the training courses. In doing so, they have completed a first “cycle” of activities for sustainable growth, and have set the stage for enlisting future contingents, as the cycle of training, multiplication of activities, and intensive teaching repeats itself. In countries where substantial enrollments have traditionally been easy to achieve, the institute can grow in size to accommodate the influx of as many as 100 new believers in a month—over 1,000 new Bahá'ís a year within a single cluster.

Progress in establishing a cycle of activities for sustainable expansion and consolidation will, of course, require that particular attention be paid to intensive teaching. From reports received to date, it seems there are at least four different approaches that are emerging in different settings for accelerated expansion in strong clusters.

Receptive Populations in Core Activities: The Adami Tulu Cluster in Ethiopia

In one emerging pattern for intensive growth, the three key core activities act as portals to entry by troops among a receptive population. This was evident in recent developments in Ethiopia. In reflecting upon who could be invited to participate in study circles, the Bahá'ís in the Adami Tulu cluster, drawing on the opportunities available to some Bahá'í schoolteachers, decided to invite their secondary school students. Soon after Ridván 2003, one youth was approached and encouraged to invite some friends to a study circle. The students were instantly attracted to Book 1 of the Ruhi Institute. Soon 20, 40, then almost 200 young people were awaiting the opportunity to study the series of Ruhi Institute books, all as a result of friends inviting friends. Bahá'ís across the country rallied to support the groundswell of interest. One group of the most capable students was taken to the national institute facility in Debra Zeit for an

intensive study program of almost two months during the summer break, in order to complete the entire sequence of courses. Other intensive courses were offered in the cluster to each contingent of students. Initially almost all of the participants were non-Bahá'ís, but they soon embraced the Faith through the influence of the Word of God experienced during the study of Book 1. The young people were fervent in their newfound love of Bahá'u'lláh; many testified during the course of the program to their desire to teach their friends and family.

By the end of the summer period, there were 392 declarants. Of these, 386 had completed Book 1; 282—Book 2; 76—Book 3 (due to the limited number of copies); 161—Book 4; 111—Book 6; and 62—Book 7. Over 600 Bahá'ís, friends, and family gathered for the ceremony honoring those students who completed the entire sequence. According to a report received at the Bahá'í World Centre,

Upon the graduation ceremony they were able to fascinate us with their deep and insightfully composed poems, amazing dramas and moving songs. The delight they created is such that that we cannot possibly portray it in words. If it were possible, all one would wish is that all those well-wishers and interested parties were physically present to witness the height of spiritual joy and happiness they managed to create.

At a later point, a reflection meeting was held, consisting largely of the new believers, who enthusiastically committed themselves to invite 1,067 non-Bahá'ís to participate in core activities in the three months while establishing 79 study circles, 44 children's classes, and 57 devotional meetings. Initial efforts were promising. The number of localities in the cluster opened to the Faith increased from 7 to 18, and classes for Books 1 and 2 were initiated in several villages by the youth tutors. At the second reflection gathering, however, it was observed that only a portion of the intended goals was achieved, owing to the realities of their lives—particularly the need to help on family farms during the harvest period and the return to school. Nevertheless, commitment remains undiminished as the cluster now begins the work of learning how to integrate the youth into effective patterns of expansion and consolidation given their particular opportunities and restrictions during the school year. In December 2003, 566 individuals had completed Book 1; 297—Book 2; 83—Book 3; 168—Book 4; 118—Book 6; and 96—Book 7. The friends in the area, with the assistance of the institutions of the Faith, including the training institute, also plan to repeat the pattern of intensive teaching and training when the school year comes to an end.

Projects for Large-Scale Expansion: Thiruvannamalai Cluster in India (T.V. Malai)

A second approach to intensive growth has emerged in countries such as India, which have experienced mass teaching in the past. Projects for large-scale growth are organized to present the Faith to large groups in rural settings in strong clusters, enroll them, and immediately bring a significant percentage of the new believers into the training institute courses. Core activities are further multiplied to provide for the spiritual nourishment of these believers and their families, including their children. A challenge in such clusters is to provide opportunities for those whose hearts have been attracted to be confirmed in their newfound faith through consolidation activities. Another challenge is to ensure that a sizable number of these new believers go through the entire sequence of courses and initiate their own activities in service to the Cause, to make certain that the process is sustained.

A report from a reflection meeting in June 2003 in the T.V. Malai cluster in India indicated that a teaching project implemented between February and May 2003 resulted in 1,700 new believers. During that period, 537 new believers completed Book 1, with another 131 in process. Core activities included 151 devotional meetings, 67 children's classes, and 18 study circles. The pyramid of human resources for the cluster indicated for Book 1 a total of 1,983; for Book 2—

380; for Book 3—156; for Book 4—84; for Book 6—49; and for Book 7—26. At the reflection meeting, friends from 15 communities in the cluster committed to 417 devotional meetings, 104 children's classes, and 89 study circles. It was anticipated that another 1,415 new declarants would be brought into the Faith in the next three months. By October 2003, the following number of individuals advanced through the sequence of materials: for Book 1—2,464; for Book 2—512; for Book 3—169; for Book 4—100; for Book 6—55; and for Book 7—34. In the past year the enrollments reached 2,064 by November.

Development and Growth in Clusters Affected by Serious Lack of Infrastructure: Battambang Cluster in Cambodia

A third approach to intensive growth, involving activities for social and economic development closely associated with the teaching work, has occurred in countries that have experienced long periods of devastating war or natural calamity or are characterized by very poor infrastructure. While there is a high degree of receptivity among the masses, there is also a general breakdown of the government machinery, needed to support education, health, and other social amenities. In such situations, the training institute has the opportunity to introduce other educational programs alongside the sequence of courses. The challenge in these areas is to achieve the right balance in conducting study circles and other educational projects so that the movement of a large number of individuals through the courses is not relegated to the background. An example of this approach is the activities in Battambang, Cambodia.

In 1994, a Bahá'í-inspired agency, the Cambodian Organization for Research, Development and Education (CORDE), was established to apply Bahá'í teachings to uplift the people of the region around Battambang. Initial activities that focused on health eventually led to offering informal after-school tutorial classes for children. By 1997, there were some 20 classes with 500 children. Beyond its contribution to social and economic development, CORDE now plays a vital role in the progress of this rural cluster by providing capable believers with a means of employment without the necessity of their moving to an urban area, thus enabling them to continue their participation in the work of the Faith.

Supported by a very strong institute process, the number of Bahá'ís in the Battambang cluster has grown steadily to more than 3,000, about 1 percent of the population. New believers from May 2002 to April 2003 totaled 852, primarily youth. In April 2003, there were 24 study circles with 231 attending; 44 children's classes with 732; 30 junior youth classes with 424; and 38 devotional meetings with 715. The pattern of expansion and consolidation has been sustained since that time. The progress in the institute process, from June to December 2003 was as follows:

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 6	Book 7
	1,360	745	451	314	80	48
	1,872	1,097	765	648	348	246

By December, 1,691 new believers were added. There were 80 active tutors completing 41 study circles with 398 participants; 42 children's classes with 742; 60 junior youth classes with 1,101; and 300 devotional meetings with over a thousand attending. Among the effective strategies utilized were centralized courses for youth to train tutors and children's class teachers, which resulted in 80 percent of the participants arising to serve.

Learning about Effective Teaching: Perth Cluster in Australia

Finally, a fourth approach to intensive growth involves systematic efforts to improve the effectiveness of teaching in clusters in the western part of Australia and in urban communities where teaching has traditionally been more challenging and growth somewhat slower. Because there are already some well-developed communities in such clusters, through institute campaigns, a sizable number of individuals can move through the entire sequence of courses and rapidly advance to take on the challenge of growth. Once the institute process has been established and core activities multiply, deliberate measures need to be taken to concentrate energies on learning how to achieve some growth, and then to progress, step by step, to reach ever-larger numbers of new believers per year: from 10, to 20, to 50, to 100, and then beyond. The primary challenge in such clusters is to raise up an increasing number of effective teachers of the Faith, particularly through emphasizing the concepts, attitudes, and skills presented in Ruhi Institute Books 2 and 6. Refresher courses and opportunities for practical experiences to try out new skills are some of the methods used to meet this challenge.

One focused effort to learn about more effective teaching is illustrated by the community in Perth, Australia. After reflection and consultation, the friends observed that if they wanted to aim for 100 new believers, they would have to invite nearly 3,000 people to participate in core activities. This would require about 300 believers with some capacity for teaching, as a result of their training in the institute, who would each identify a list of perhaps 10 contacts that they could pray for, invite, then follow-up, teach, and nurture. At an initial meeting to introduce the plan, up to 80 people volunteered to participate; then the number quickly grew to around 130. In the early weeks of the campaign, 360 individuals were added to the prayer lists of 45 believers, and about 125 seekers began attending activities. The friends in Perth commented:

We are at the stage now that we are seeing large numbers of non-Bahá'ís entering our activities. It is amazing to see a community such as Perth, which has largely been inwardly looking prior to the 12 Month Plan, now witness comparatively large numbers of non-Bahá'ís embraced by the three core activities, BESS [Bahá'í Education in State Schools] classes and other social activities within the Bahá'í community. We have witnessed literally 15-20 fold increases in the number of non-Bahá'ís 'in the system'... of some communities through involvement in the 3 core activities.

The current challenge that faces us is that the Bahá'ís [are] struggling to know what to do with their... friends who have been to a number of devotional meetings or have finished Book 1—the 'next step' in their movement towards Bahá'u'lláh. Many do not become Bahá'ís after these activities, but could potentially declare with more nurturing and teaching. Opening these doors is our current learning.

This approach is enhanced through the establishment of teaching teams. Individuals who have completed Book 7 are encouraged to form a group of 4 to 6 people who can meet regularly for encouragement and reflection on their teaching efforts. Such small groups can, among themselves, make a list of 50 or more contacts. The teams foster initiative in identifying seekers and inviting non-Bahá'ís, in multiplying core activities that reach beyond the Bahá'í community, and in carrying out practical teaching activities that improve skills and increase enrollments.